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AUTHOR Stroman, Carolyn A.
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ABSTRACT

A content analysis was made of all issues of "Newsweek," "Time," and "U. S. News and World Report" published during 1978 to identify the picture of race relations that was presented to the public. Among the findings were the following: (1) "Newsweek" gave the most well-rounded coverage, "U. S. News" gave the most interpretive coverage, and "Time" presented the least cohesive picture of the status of race relations: (2) race relations was given a generally low level of attention ("U. S. News" was the only magazine that carried more race-related news than sports news): (3) more than one-third of the race-related stories dealt with the theme of reverse discrimination in education and employment, with the Supreme Court's decision in "Bakke v Regents of University of California" receiving more coverage than any other event: and (4) although the magazines identified serious racial problems, their overall coverage suggested that racial problems were minimal or nonexistent. It was concluded that the news magazines, especially "Time," failed to communicate an understanding of the underlying dynamics of race relations and of the importance of eradicating racial discrimination. (GT)

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MAGAZINE DIVISION

"RACE RELATIONS IN NEWS MAGAZINES"

By

Carolyn A. Stroman
Research Associate/Assistant Professor
Institute for Urban Affairs and Research
Howard University

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"Race Relations in News Magazines"

Race relations is one of the most firmly entrenched social problems in America. It has been consistently identified in the Gallup Poll as one of the most important problems facing the country. From 1965 to 1968, it was the number one domestic problem.

With few exceptions, however, the media, along with other institutions, generally ignored the problem of race relations until the late 1960s. Among the key factors that resulted in the media paying more attention to race relations were the urban riots of the sixties and the subsequent Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.

Charging the media with contributing to the black-white schism in America, the Kerner report criticized the media for failing to keep abreast of the racial situation in America. In their analysis of the effect of the mass media on the riots, the members of the Kerner Commission concluded that "the media thus far have failed to report adequately on the causes and consequences of civil disorders and the underlying problems of race relations."[1]

The Kerner Commission's assessment of the role of the media vis-a-vis the problem of race relations was made public in March, 1968. This research is concerned with media coverage of race relations ten years later--1978. Specifically, it asks the question "What picture of race relations was being presented to the magazine reading public a decade after the release of the Kerner report?"

As early as the 1920s, writers were concerned with the role of the media in the formation of our perceptions of social issues such as race relations. Lippmann's 1922 book Public Opinion and Park's 1925 book The City

contain chapters which are indicative of this early concern.[2]

Later writers also expressed concern about the relationship between the media and our perceptions of social problems. Lasswell, for example, identified a concept--the surveillance function of the media--that has importance for the resolution of societal problems.[3] In The Black American and the Press, Lyle explained how the surveillance function is carried out by the news media: "They observe developments and events, decide which are important for the population, and then pass the word along in newspapers, news reports on radio and television, and in news magazines."[4]

How well the media perform their surveillance function has also been a concern of communication researchers. One basis for this concern can be found in both agenda-setting literature and in the cultural norms theory. Agenda-setting literature asserts a strong positive relationship between the issues emphasized in the media and the salience of these issues for the public. As McCombs and Shaw pointed out, people learn how much importance to attach to an issue from the emphasis placed on it by the mass media.[5] Thus, if the media ignores race relations, for example, then the public will probably not view it as a crucial issue. Similarly, De Fleur's cultural norms theory argues that the media, through selective presentation and emphasis on certain issues and events, are in a position to "define the situation."[6]

There are those who believe that the media have not carried out their surveillance function adequately. McCombs addressed this issue when he wrote:

> The press is quite adept at handling major misfortunes such as assassinations of political leaders, outbreaks of war, and economic catastrophes. The press can respond rapidly to such events, more rapidly than most public or quasi-public institutions... But when it comes to reporting the broad secular sweep of history, the major trends and thrust of the times, then the press often lags significantly behind other public institutions. It is not in the press that one often enough learns of deeply embedded social problems, significant social realignments, and proposed solutions to the problems of the day.[7]

Although the media's ability to carry out the surveillance function is limited by numerous constraints such as time factors, amount of available newshole, available staff, and amount of news copy available, the media are still expected to keep its audiences abreast of the issues of the day.[8] Speaking directly to the issue of race relations, the Kerner Commission commented "It is the responsibility of the news media to tell the story of race relations in America, and with notable exceptions, the media have not yet turned to the task with the wisdom, sensitivity, and expertise it demands."[9]

Accepting the notion that, in the past, the media may not have done an adequate job of surveilling social problems, is there any reason to believe that the picture may have been altered in regard to race relations? In explaining the past failure of the news media to report on race relations, ignorance and lack of concern about the black community have been cited as contributing factors. In the years since the riots of the sixties, however, media personnel have reportedly become aware and responsive to the problems of the black community and race relations.[10] Klein reported on a survey of newspaper, magazine, radio, and television executives which found that "the media have become aware of shortcomings after decades of neglect and journalism is beginning to recognize its responsibility in the quest for better race relations in America."[11]

With this in mind, a content analysis of news magazines was designed to identify the picture of race relations that was presented to the public in 1978. The content analysis was guided by these questions:

1. How much coverage was devoted to race relations?
2. What types of race-related news stories were provided?
3. What was the subject-matter content of race-related stories?
4. What kinds of solutions to racial problems were presented?

News magazines were chosen for this analysis for several reasons. First, magazines are not as limited by frequency of publication and space as are other media, thus, they provide more opportunities for thorough analysis and interpretation of crucial social issues such as race relations. Second, since this research attempts to identify solutions to the race problem, it was felt that magazines would be more likely to provide solutions. Third, it has been found that policy makers report reading news magazines heavily to aid them in resolving national policy issues.[12]

METHODOLOGY

As mentioned previously, content analysis was the research technique used to provide answers to the research questions. In the content analysis all issues of Newsweek, Time and U.S. News and World Report published during 1978 were examined.

Articles were located first by searching Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature for articles indexed under the following headings: "Race relations", "Race discrimination", "Discrimination", "Discrimination in education", "Discrimination in employment", "Discrimination in housing". Subheadings under the heading "Blacks" were also searched. Then, the magazines were searched for articles that dealt with relations between the races that may not have been picked up by Readers' Guide.

After the articles were located, each news article was coded as to size, type, and subject-matter content.

Size was determined by measuring the number of column inches. Measurement was based on a standard three column page.

Type of article referred to whether a news story was a hard news item, an interpretative item, a feature story, an editorial or opinion column. Hard news was operationalized as an account of a particular event. Interpretative was operationalized as news which goes beyond superficial spot reporting and which places a story in some context.

The following subject-matter categories were used. An example of the types of race-related articles placed in each category is included:

Relations between the races in:

1. Education--"Forced Busing and White Flight", Time, October 25, 1978.

2. Employment--"Economics of Discrimination", Newsweek, July 10, 1978.

3. Housing--(This category was later discarded because no articles were found in which the primary focus was on housing.)

4. Politics--"If the Republicans Are to Win More Black Support", U.S. News and World Report, April 10, 1978.

5. Other--"Black Youth: A Lost Generation?", Newsweek, August 7, 1978.

In addition, potential solutions to racial problems were recorded.

Coding was done by one primary coder; however, a check was run by having another person code a third of the articles. Intercoder reliability between the two coders was .90.

For comparative purposes, each of the news magazines was also measured for its sports news coverage.

RESULTS

The search for race relations stories disclosed 54 articles totalling 2323 column inches. Time ran the largest number of race-related stories, 21, Newsweek was next with 19, and U.S. News trailed with 14.

In terms of volume of coverage, Newsweek carried the most material with 850 column inches, Time was second with 779 column inches, and U.S. News carried the least amount of material, 694 column inches.

When viewed in terms of mean length of articles carried, the above ranking changes. U.S. News generally carried the longest articles; the mean length of its race relations stories was 49 column inches. Newsweek's average story was a bit shorter, 45 column inches. Carrying the shortest articles, Time devoted an average of 37 column inches to a race relations news story.

In addition to carrying the longest articles, U.S. News ranked first in interpretative and analytical ability. Newsweek occupied the middle position with its coverage being almost balanced between hard news and interpretative articles. Time, with the largest number of stories, ranked at the bottom as it provided little background information or analysis in its race relations stories.

INSERT TABLE 1

Looking at the data in Table 1 as a whole, it can be seen that just under ½ of the race relations stories appearing in the three magazines were hard news items. Perhaps what is more indicative of the event-

oriented news of race relations provided by these magazines is the monthly distribution of the articles. Coverage of race relations reached a peak in all three magazines in the July 10 issue, the first issue to appear after the Supreme Court issued its Bakke ruling.

Stories that formed the picture of race relations presented by the news magazines covered a broad range of topics. As Table 2 indicates, however, the most discussed topic was race relations in education.

INSERT TABLE 2

Under the education topic, articles relating to the Supreme Court's ruling regarding university admissions--the Bakke decision--received the lion's share of coverage, both in frequency of mention and amount of space. Thirteen of the 23 education articles dealt with this issue, as did 24% of the total number of race relations articles.

The second most frequently mentioned issue within the education category was school desegregation and busing. Six articles, which amounted to 11% of the total coverage, discussed this issue.

Employment was the next largest category. Within this category, a Bakke-related issue was the most frequently mentioned issue. Seven out of 13 articles spotlighted affirmative action/reverse discrimination. Thus, 13% of the total coverage was devoted to this issue.

If one adds the Bakke decision articles together with the affirmative action/reverse discrimination articles, it is clear that over 1/3 of the race relations coverage in news magazines dealt with the theme of reverse discrimination.

In the politics category, the emphasis was on the political clout of blacks; the importance of the black vote and the subsequent ability of black leaders to wield power in the political arena were stressed.

Surprisingly, none of the race relations stories appearing in the three magazines focused on housing.

The other category contained a variety of subjects including the problem of the black image on television, the lifting of the ban in the Mormon Church which prohibited blacks from becoming priests, racial tensions in Alabama, black crime, and police brutality against blacks. However, none of these issues was mentioned more than once.

In the description of the subject-matter content, it was pointed out that the Bakke decision received more coverage than any other race-related issue. It should also be noted that not only were the three magazines in agreement that the Bakke decision was the race-related story that warranted the most frequent mention, the magazines also agreed that it should be given more analysis, interpretation, and play than any other race-related issue.

It is also significant that the Bakke decision was the only race-related story that was accorded front page treatment. Bakke-related headlines and pictures were spread across the covers of each of the magazines on July 10, the issue published after the Bakke decision was announced.

From the presentation of the results so far, one would probably assume that the Bakke decision, affirmative action/reverse discrimination, and school desegregation and busing were the most vital race-related issues of 1978. But were they? The magazines themselves identified what were perhaps more pressing race-related issues.

In "Stepping Up the Pressure", Newsweek (February 13) identified several matters as being vital to blacks in the near future: welfare reform, urban policy, and the Humphrey-Hawkins full-employment bill. In addition, in "Kerner Plus 10", an article which reported on the progress made by America in correcting racial injustices, Newsweek (March 6) quoted Senator Edward Brooke as saying "The U.S. is facing the same realities today as in 1968. In many parts of the country, segregation in housing, schools and jobs has gotten worse, and unemployment for blacks--now twice the national average--is still a serious problem."

Time (May 22), which was blatantly negligent in identifying racial problems, also noted that black unemployment remains more than double the white rate.

"An Agonizing Reappraisal for Minorities", a U.S. News analysis (August 14) impressed upon the reader that discrimination still existed in housing, employment, and education; it also cited evidence from a survey which pointed to "a growing feeling among whites that blacks have achieved enough".

The solutions to racial problems offered in the news magazines failed to make clear the magazines' assessments of which racial problems were the most crucial. Unfortunately, these magazines contained few solutions. Indeed, a reading of the 54 articles produced one solution. In a special report by U.S. News, "24 Years of Integration: Has Busing Really Worked?", readers were informed that "getting housing for blacks more widely dispersed appears to be the only solution to the problem of racial isolation in the schools of most big cities."

In order to put the data presented above in a comparative framework, the data concerning sports coverage will be presented here. The three magazines carried a total of 100 articles which focused on sports. Newsweek contained the largest number, 51, followed by Time with 43. U.S. News carried 6 sports articles.

Sports news in the three magazines totalled 3943 column inches. With 1750 column inches, Time had the most space allocated for sports, followed closely by Newsweek with 1743 column inches. U.S. News carried 450 column inches of sports news.

Comparing this amount of coverage with the data in Table 1, it is clear that U.S. News was the only one of the three magazines which carried more race-related news than sports news. Looking at the data as a whole, it appears that sports was discussed more frequently than race relations and more space was devoted to it than to race relations.

DISCUSSION

What picture of race relations emerges from the presentation of findings? If one accepts the views of news magazines, tensions between blacks and whites, except in the areas of affirmative action/reverse discrimination and busing, are at a minimum or non-existent. Housing is no longer a crucial race-related issue, nor is it a major problem for blacks. The precariousness of life in the black ghetto is no longer a problem to be debated. And, the big concern about employment is not full employment or unemployment, instead, the concern is whether affirmative action is permitting blacks to advance at the expense of whites.

Indeed, judging from the coverage of race relations in news magazines, the underlying problems that lay the breeding ground for a Bakke decision

were no longer in existence. That is, the pervasive discrimination and segregation in employment, education, and housing that the Kerner Commission wrote so eloquently about in 1968 were not portrayed in news magazines in 1978.

A careful reading of analytical, incisive reports as the National Urban League's State of Black Americans 1978 will reveal that the above descriptions did not portray an accurate picture of the status of race relations in 1978.

What does the above discussion suggest about news magazine coverage of race relations? Seemingly, news magazines have reverted back to the former practice of ignoring or minimizing race relations as a problem. In addition, problems within the black community are generally ignored by news magazines.

When compared with the sports coverage data, the data are also suggestive of a low level of attention being given to the problem of race relations. The number of sports articles was almost doubled that of race-related articles.

This failure of news magazines to perform their surveillance function in regards to race relations has importance for the society as a whole. Becker and McLeod's suggestion that "the racial injustices of the last 100 years that erupted into violence in our cities in the late 1960s may have been corrected had they been forced onto the public's agenda" points to the importance of recognizing social problems before they reach a crisis stage.[13]

Clearly, it is not the purpose of this research to argue that news magazine coverage will, by itself, solve the race relations problem or any other social problem. Indeed, full recognition is given to Schramm's observation that the media function as just one element in a highly complex social system and that their impact is moderated and mediated by numerous other factors in the system.[14]

Still, the media are an important part of the social system, and, as past research has shown, do play a role in our perceptions of what is and is not an important problem worthy of attention. For these reasons, we must not underestimate the contribution made by the media in the resolution of social problems.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A content analysis of Newsweek, Time, and U.S. News disclosed a total of 54 race-related articles. These articles were then examined for the kinds of race relations information that were supplied to the magazine reading public during 1978.

An evaluation of the 3 magazines in terms of amount of coverage, topical coverage, and type of coverage revealed that Newsweek, which had the largest amount of coverage, gave the most well-rounded coverage; U.S. News tended to give the most analytical, interpretative coverage; and Time, with the largest number of stories, presented the least cohesive picture of the status of race relations in 1978.

Several conclusions were reached from this examination of news magazine coverage of race relations. First, race relations was given a low level of attention by news magazines in 1978. Second, the 3 news magazines were very limited in their ability to pinpoint potential race-related problems and to present possible solutions to racial problems. Third, by placing primary emphasis on the Bakke decision, the news magazines continued the traditional practice of the news media of responding to events rather than issues.

By placing major emphasis on the Bakke decision rather than the conditions underlying that decision, news magazines effectively overshadowed

other crucial race-related issues - issues that must be highlighted in order to provide an accurate portrayal of the status of race relations.

In summary, the over-riding conclusion that was reached after this monitoring of Newsweek, Time and U.S. News was similar to that reached by the Kerner Commission: News magazines, especially Time, failed to communicate to their readers a real understanding of the underlying dynamics of race relations and the importance of eradicating this long-standing social problem.

Table 1

Summary of Race Relations Coverage

	Newsweek	Time	U.S. News	All Magazines
Type of article				
Hard News	8	13	4	26
Interpretative	7	4	9	19
Feature	2	0	1	3
Editorial/Opinion Column	2	4	0	6
Total Number of Articles	19	21	14	54
Total Column Inches	850	779	694	2323

Table 2

Topical Coverage of Race Relations

	Newsweek	Time	U.S. News	All Magazines
Education	9	8	6	23
Employment	3	7	3	13
Housing	0	0	0	0
Politics	1	1	4	6
Other	6	5	1	12
Total	19	21	14	54

NOTES

1. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 363.

2. Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (New York: Macmillan, 1922); Robert Park, The City (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925).

3. Harold D. Lasswell, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society" in Wilbur Schramm and Donald F. Roberts, eds., The Process and Effects of Mass Communication (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 84-99.

4. Jack Lyle, The Black American and the Press (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1968), p. xi.

5. Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press" in Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, eds., The Emergence of American Political Issues (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1977), p. 5.

6. Melvin L. DeFleur, Theories of Mass Communication (New York: David McKay, 1970), pp. 129-30.

7. Maxwell McCombs, "All the News..." in Maxwell McCombs, Donald Shaw, and David Grey, eds., Handbook of Reporting Methods (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976), p. 5.

8. Donald L. Shaw, "Surveillance vs. Constraint: Press Coverage of a Social Issue", Journalism Quarterly, 46 (Winter 1969), p. 707.

9. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, p. 384.

10. William L. Rivers, "The Negro and the News: A Case Study" in Wilbur Schramm and Donald F. Roberts, eds., The Process and Effects of Mass Communication, pp. 162-64.

11. Woody Klein, "News Media and Race Relations: A Self-Portrait", Columbia Journalism Review, 7 (Fall 1968), p. 49.

12. Carol H. Weiss, "What America's Leaders Read", Public Opinion Quarterly, 38 (Spring 1974), p. 21.

13. Lee Becker and Jack McLeod, "Political Consequences of Agenda-Setting", Mass Comm Review, 3 (Spring 1976), p. 10.

14. Wilbur Schramm and Donald F. Roberts, eds. The Process and Effects of Mass Communication (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 519.